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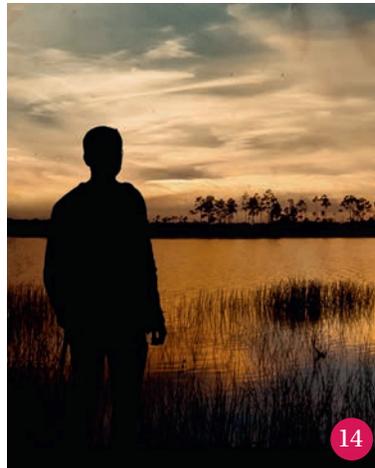


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Dreaming big

Everybody knows about *Squid Game*, but how much do you know about the TV industry that created it? Nick Edwards takes a deep dive into South Korea's production industry and finds out what makes it tick

By the far the 'buzziest' show of 2021 was Netflix's comic-book like dystopian thriller *Squid Game*. Following in the footsteps of the surprise Oscar-winning film *Parasite*, and formats, such as *The Masked Singer*, the show confirmed beyond doubt South Korea's status as a potent hotbed of creativity.

"The Korean market is like a hot furnace now," says Ki-hyuk Lee, chief strategy officer of *Ghost Doctor* and *Twenty-Five Twenty-One* producer Studio Dragon. Underlining the point, Netflix invested around \$500m in Korean content last year, while local media giant CJ ENM is to spend \$4.4bn over the next five years and streamer Wavve (known for *SF8* and *Mtopia*) said it would be spending \$884m by 2025.

Dreams of making it big are inspiring young actors, directors and writers from all over Asia to descend on South Korea as they do to LA in America. "Traditional media operators, new operators and creative people are being drawn in from Korea and other countries," says Ki-hyuk Lee.

Korea's export legacy

Beneath the flashy headlines, however, Korea's scripted industry is a far more nuanced space. Shows such as *Squid Game* and its follow up, *Hellbound*, are the exception rather than the rule. Most are family, rom-com and specifically 'relationship-based' dramas. The majority of traditional Korean TV drama is directly comparable to the standard primetime fare offered on all free-to-air and linear channels in Europe and around the world.

This traditional style of Korean TV drama has been sold to other parts of Asia, Latin America and the Middle-East for years. *Squid Game*, meanwhile, was famously rejected multiple times before Netflix agreed to make it. Even in countries such as the UK, where the show was one of the most talked about of 2021, the various conflicting methods of gathering viewing figure metrics make it hard to establish whether or not it was more or less popular than the classic primetime shows on traditional outlets (such as the BBC or ITV).

What is clear is that millennial audiences, particularly in Europe and North America, and the global streamers who cater to them, want the next high-end genre-breaking K-drama. The kind of content that sits perfectly alongside Netflix's other hits, such as *Stranger Things* (US), *Sex Education* (UK) and *Dark* (Germany).

"What we're seeing with Korean drama is what we've already seen from other international markets," says Ken Kim, CEO of Webtoon US, whose digital comics include *Hellbound* and *All Of Us Are Dead*, which have both been adapted as series for Netflix.

"There are a number of reasons for this shift, but great storytelling is the key; new technology and distribution wouldn't matter if people weren't captivated by the content. The most important connecting thread between *Squid Game* and *Parasite* isn't that they're both Korean: it's that they're both incredible stories."

Complexity & nuance

The reasons why traditional and the new wave of K-dramas are enjoyed by global audiences – despite the presence of unfamiliar actors and cultures – are the same.

"People like Korean drama because there's always a character the audience can confide in and it's not necessarily the main character," says Deborah Youn, head of business in Asia for CJ ENM-owned Echo Rights, which distributes titles such as *Mouse* and *Hometown*.

Sol Lee of international distributor KT Alpha – which houses *Mission Possible* and *The Man From Nowhere*, among others – agrees. "Most Korean series have a unique point of view which is not only focused on a hero or heroine," she says. In *Squid Game*, there are many different characters, and audiences around the world like and identify with different ones.

Another key feature of K-drama is that while "there's always a good character and an evil character," continues Youn, "the evil character always has a backstory that explains how they became evil." This resonates with the world view for many. "People in general see the good in people and that it's their social circumstances that make them this way," she says.

"In general, South Korean drama is more complex, the characters are more complex and they have more complex relationships. The pace is really fast and shows often feature more complex storytelling devices such as time lapses," says Nicola Söderlund, managing partner at Echo Rights, acquired by CJ ENM in 2018.

"You can't watch it while doing the dishes. If you miss two minutes of dialogue in K-drama you won't know what's going on," adds Youn. The sophisticated

"The most important connecting thread between *Squid Game* and *Parasite* isn't that they're both Korean: it's that they're both incredible stories"

Ken Kim,
Webtoon



Opposite, Apple TV+ series *Pachinko* may up-end the status quo with its use of multiple languages

writing can, in some ways, create a barrier to adapting K-drama abroad however.

“It’s sometimes a challenge for European writers to adapt, but when succeeding it could also be very rewarding,” says Söderlund.

Pachinko's potential

While Korean drama is booming, the chance to work directly with English-speaking countries on co-productions remains limited. “Co-production is not really that active right now but the opportunities are still open,” says Lee.

Additionally, a Korean drama won’t be of interest to a local broadcaster unless “99% of it is in the Korean language,” says Youn. “Only the global streamers would consider [anything different].” The success of Apple TV+’s upcoming *Pachinko* – based on a British novel with a narrative that switches between Korean, Japanese and English – therefore could be pivotal in changing the current status quo.

There are other challenges on taking Korean dramas global, too. The standard run of a K-drama on TV is long in comparison to most English-language series, with around 16 episodes. Fitting such a format into standardised schedules is another barrier to selling K-drama abroad.



Hometown and other K-dramas like it offer viewers clear-cut heroes and villains

Much more problematic, however, is the fact that Korean stories are self-contained. Story, character arcs, everything, all finish at the end of the first season – the exact opposite to the returning series model that has been consumed by much of the rest of the globe for over two decades. There are a few exceptions, such as Studio Dragon’s crime thriller *Voice*, now in its fourth season, but these are rare.

Attempting to break this tradition is economically very difficult. Almost a decade ago, it became legal for private companies to own pay-TV channels. In those days, in common with much of the rest of the world, actors didn’t want to be in a TV series because they were looked down upon in comparison to cinema.

The result was that private companies hugely increased actors’ fees. The shows became successful, not only in Korea but in other countries too – but those high wages set a precedent. Today, A-List actors are booked up 2-3 years in advance, so to make a returning series, a producer would likely have to break actors’ contracts, something that would blow the budget of almost all shows.

Squid Game, which was also originally written as one season, has been commissioned for a second season – Netflix’s deep pockets may explain the rare exception to this rule.

Writing & rates

Like successful actors, top tier writers are also paid very well, closer to US showrunners than standard European rates, and most will write a new show every couple of years. A common practice, after receiving 30-40% of the advance, is to go on holiday for a few months to get inspired, before returning to write the project.

Amanda Groom, MD of The Bridge

The Bridge’s Amanda Groom has been working with Korea and across Asia for more than a decade. Here, she offers her advice to those wanting to build ties with the country’s TV industry.

“Korea set out determinedly to secure its place on the world stage. When I first approached international broadcasters about working with Korea it was hard to secure a meeting. It’s not now! The country has its own unique voice and its original programming is punching through with extraordinary success. I would predict that we will continue to devour these unique, creative styles of programming from Korea in addition to increasing the ways in which we co-produce with the country’s leading creatives.

“There are numerous ways for international firms to partner with Korean production companies, broadcasters and streamers. However, working with Asia requires building long term relationships. Relationships are the key to all negotiations and partnerships and it can be challenging for smaller indies to dedicate the time necessary to building those relationships over the long term. That’s why I formed The Bridge, providing a short cut for broadcasters and producers enabling them to access many of the advantages of Asia without investing the time themselves.

“Developing drama with Asia enables international producers to bring innovative new stories to English-speaking markets, stories that shine new light on history between what was previously two worlds of east and west. The Bridge is currently co-developing two scripted dramas – fascinating human stories set within significant history touch points, revealing much about our world today. If you don’t know Asian history, it’s almost impossible to understand our world today and yet few of us do! We hope to change that.”



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“You can’t watch K-drama while doing the dishes – if you miss two minutes of dialogue, you won’t know what’s going on”

Deborah Youn,
Eccho Rights



Hellbound is just one of the Korean digital comics to have been adapted by Netflix

“Writers have a much more powerful position than in Europe,” says Söderlund. “If they don’t like a project, they just don’t do it. When you want to option a series, they can just say ‘no.’”

The few writers who are considered ‘top tier’ are treated like kings, or rather queens. “The majority are female,” says Youn. “Many formerly had conventional lives and just turned out to be very talented writers. Good writers are really hard to find and most stumbled on it by chance.”

The most common way to enter the industry is to submit a short script into one of the regularly held screenwriting contests held by local broadcasters. These organisations have training programs whereby newbie writers are paired up with established talents.

Baek Mi-kyung, the writer of two hugely successful shows for cable channel JTBC – whose studio division acquired *Mare Of Easttown* prodco Wiip from Creative Artists Agency last year – was formerly an English teacher who got her big break in her 40s. *Strong Girl Bong-soon* and *Lady In Dignity*, meanwhile, were hits at home and both now also reside on Netflix.

For young writers, one way in is to start as an assistant for top writers, but the most common advice given to them is “fall in love and get a day job,” says Youn. This is not as flippant as it might sound because Korean TV drama has such a strong emphasis on relationships and relatable experiences. “Most writers don’t make it until later in life, if you’re too young you won’t get hired,” says Youn.



Investment & risk

Content strategies throughout Korea’s media industry are now designed to attract local and global viewers alike. Last year, CJ ENM snapped up Endeavor Content (*Normal People*, *Killing Eve*, *Severance*) having already invested in Skydance Media, DreamWorks and The Ink Factory.

Cable operator JTBC, as discussed, bought a majority stake in *The White House Plumbers* and *Dickinson* firm Wiip, while internet giant Naver – owners of Webtoon – acquired Wattpad, the self-publishing site from which one of Netflix’s biggest hits, *The Kissing Booth*, was sourced.

The gaze of global audiences has upped the stakes of K-drama in unexpected ways too. Ancillary income sources can be tapped from platforms, such as YouTube, and other social media. The star of Netflix’s upcoming *The Sound Of Magic* (based on Webtoon’s *Annarasumanara*), Ji Chang-wook, has 19 million Instagram followers. Product placement is huge. For Korean viewers spotting how brands insert themselves into K-drama is a pastime in itself. High-end fashion brands such as Tiffany and Cartier give exclusive pieces for popular actors to wear.

However, despite the rise in the prestige of Korean TV drama on the global stage, there has been a downside for the independent producers that initially turned the industry into such a success.

Because of the explosion in the cost of talent and production values, which have also sky-rocketed, a lot of independent production companies are now not making as much money as they used to. Writer and actor salaries can often take up to more than half of the budget. “Ten to 15 years ago, a margin of \$1m of pure profit was not uncommon for a hit show. Nowadays, a hit show does not even guarantee you will break even,” says Youn.

Increasingly, the Korean TV industry is becoming akin to the Hollywood model, whereby a studio might produce nine movies that don’t make their money back but the 10th is a huge hit that more than recoups the losses on the others.

Many independent producers, meanwhile, are bought up by large media organisations as a way to avoid bankruptcy. Recent entrants such as big spending Netflix can alleviate their debts and are keeping the wheels of the industry turning. “There is risk,” says Ki-hyuk Lee of Studio Dragon, but “this is a good time even for failure as the market is rapidly expanding.

“The efforts we put in to overcome [our] small market have resulted in the current global popularity of Korean dramas. I hope this mind-blowing investment will produce unexpected, great results likewise.” **TBI**

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Breaking the mould

Female-led drama has been on the rise for several years but there's an ongoing evolution around the types of stories now being brought to screen, writes Helen Dugdale

The Unusual Suspects is a female-led heist drama from female-led prodco Aquarius Films in Australia

In 2022, it seems odd that we're still applauding the rise in women taking charge in front and behind the camera. Surely it should just be the norm by now?

Claire Mundell, MD and creative director at Glasgow-based Synchronicity Films, believes the

demand is driven by global events. "It feels like the industry is finally catching up with the audience who, in a post #MeToo and BLM world, are demanding to hear as diverse a range of stories as possible."

More than half of Synchronicity Films' slate is written and executive produced by women. The



team have seen success adapting best-selling books by female novelists including *The Cry*, and are now working on the adaptation of Heather Morris' *The Tattooist Of Auschwitz* and *Bloody Women* by Helen Fitzgerald.

Endeavor Content, which is behind shows such as *Killing Eve*, says it constantly explores how audiences can have access to more stories from the female camp. "What we see on screen should be a reflection of the world we inhabit," says Liz Tang, director of content, "and with a world that is half female, it's about time we see more strong, diverse female-led characters and content."

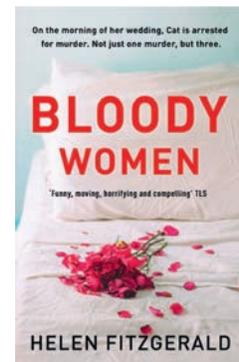
"I wish female stories didn't still qualify as 'unexplored'," admits Chiara Cardoso, head of development at BlackBox Multimedia. "We are definitely in a better position, there are still so many unheard stories with women at the forefront, and we make a point to have a specific eye for those in particular."

Vicky Ryan, co-founder and COO, Rainmaker Content, which currently has two strong female-led dramas on their slate with *Amy Winter* and *The Bone Season*, says the stories just need to keep coming. "Female-led drama has been distinguished by its success for the last few years, with shows such as *Big Little Lies* and *The Handmaid's Tale*."

"Broadcasters have realised the majority of viewers are women and want to see their experiences played out on television. Women don't want to watch programming with no female authenticity – that alienates them. With stronger voices and greater access to the creative process, I hope we continue to see a healthy flow of strong female-led dramas."

Secret ingredient

Mundell, however, questions the reasons why the audience is asking for more dramas made by and featuring women. "It's hard, and perhaps a little misguided, to generalise about what makes female



Helen Fitzgerald's *Bloody Women* is one of the next books by a female novelist to be adapted by Synchronicity

"It isn't someone's gender that makes their work unique – it's their view of the world as an individual"

Claire Mundell,
Synchronicity Films



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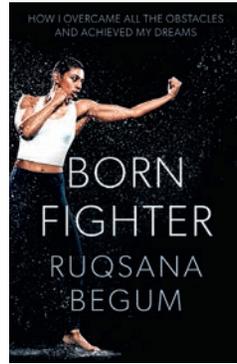
written and produced content unique.

“There’s as wide a range of taste, individuality and inspiration in work made by women as there is in work by men. It isn’t someone’s gender that makes their work unique – it’s their view of the world as an individual.”

Endeavor Content’s slate highlights this, with shows ranging from the final season of the iconic *Killing Eve*, to Amy Schumer’s *Life & Beth*, and the follow-up to *Normal People*, Sally Rooney’s adaptation of her hit novel, *Conversations With Friends*.

Tang also reveals details of her company’s first Cantonese-language series, *Dr. Cheung*. “We are seeing a lot more international-originating content made for the global stage, but not as many series with a female lead like this one,” she says.

“It’s a unique show that will leave audiences gripped by *Dr. Cheung* as she uses a combination of the hard facts of each case, alongside the answers



Ruqsana Begum’s *Born Fighter* is being adapted by BlackBox, while *Conversations With Friends* (below) is on Endeavor’s slate

provided by the criminals to glean beneath the surface and make decisions that will change the course of their fate forever.”

The louder calls for more female characters isn’t being ignored by commissioners. As Mundell highlights, audiences want to watch characters that intrigue them. “It’s a bit like life – we naturally want to hang out with characters we admire, who take us into their worlds and whose company we like being in. We want a second season of something because we want to be back with those characters again.”

BlackBox is working on the adaptation of Ruqsana Begum’s autobiography *Born Fighter*, the story of a Muslim woman in the UK who defeated all odds and became world champion of *Mai Tai*, having trained for years without her family knowing, overcoming chronic illnesses and the judgement of her community. “It talks about the real world, real communities, real experiences,” says Cardoso.



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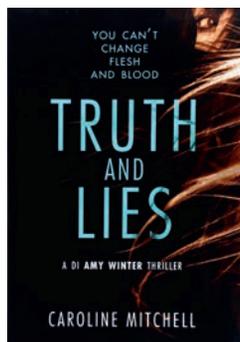
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Pandore (top) is on APC Studios's slate, while *Tribhanga* has been a hit for Netflix and Rainmaker is adapting the 'Amy Winters' books (blew) for the screen



For Emmanuelle Guilbart, joint-CEO & founder at APC Studios, paying attention to female characters is part of the global need to rethink representation and to see different demographics take the lead and explore fresh perspectives through them.

“When it comes to women, it is not so much the lack of representation that needs to be tackled, but a continued misrepresentation. Women do not have to fit a certain mould, so we understand the need to have a range of characters with different personalities and approaches to life.

“This is how we have seen our content stand out in an ever-changing and growing marketplace, by telling stories with complex and realistic women at the heart of them, and with the women behind the camera reclaiming their voices and being in control of their storytelling.”

APC Studios' flagship show, *Keeping Faith*, has paved the way for other female-driven content from the team, including *The Unusual Suspects* and yet-to-air *Pandore* and *True Colours*.

The appetite for stories created by and starring women is also booming globally, including in India. Mrinalini Jain, EVP of business & content at Banijay Asia, says that in her market, characters “are being written better than ever before, with authenticity and honesty, and that’s a very welcome change.”

She adds: “We have seen a lot of female-driven cop thrillers and crime shows. One of Banijay Asia’s most recent female-driven successes is the film *Tribhanga*, produced for Netflix. Written and directed by well-known actor Renuka Shahane, the story is based on her own experiences with her mother.”

The crew effect

The suggestion that the global plethora of production companies governed by women is pushing the demand for more female-led drama onto channels and platforms isn’t a belief shared by everyone. Cardoso at BlackBox isn’t wholly convinced that only women can tell female stories.

“There is great value in having different points of view when telling any story. We always look to have a variety of voices in all of our projects – whether the projects are more male, or female-skewed.

“It also shouldn’t only be the responsibility of women to bring more females and other marginalised voices to the fore. Men must make use of their privilege and they have many opportunities to support this too.”

Guilbart is steadfast though in her belief that female crews tell stories differently and more truthfully. “They give authenticity to female representation and bring these new perspectives to the screen. It is exciting to see how our female creators do not shy away from any genre: *Pandore* as a political thriller wouldn’t have the same insight if it hadn’t been created, written, and directed by three women.”

The shift in power for women is also evident in India, as Banijay’s Jain sums up. “Behind the camera, women are using their voices to tell their own stories and they are developing characters that represent them.

“Those behind the narrative of the shows are bringing more empathy to characters, which makes them feel real. They are creating content they want to see and using their influence to bring audiences stories that need to be recognised.” **TBI**

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Uncovering Paradys

South African drama is gaining international attention like never before. Richard Middleton talks to the creators of *Paradys* to find out about the story's unique, disturbing roots, its development strategy & its global potential

Paradys is in many ways the epitome of what a global drama is all about in 2022: a uniquely local story whose themes resonate worldwide.

The character-driven murder mystery is at its heart a crime story, but set in the South African desert town of Paradys. In some ways, the place is much like any small rural community in the country, except everyone is white.

Inspired by a real place in the Northern Cape called Orania, the show explores what happens when two black detectives are sent to the town to investigate a horrific murder, creating a canvas from which multiple themes are drawn out.

Roots & inspiration

“The show has its beginnings in 1994 with South Africa’s first elections,” explains co-creator Darrel Bristow-Bovey, who as a

journalist had been due to visit the town more than two decades ago.

That trip never occurred but the town remained firmly in Bristow-Bovey’s thoughts and those of many South Africans, he says. Years later, it again surfaced after a few drinks with friend and writer Anton Visser, and the pair set to work on creating a story against this most unusual of backgrounds.

“We were both so aware that there was this small corner of South Africa that no one really can get into, so we started exploring what would happen if two black cops were sent in and had the power to ask the questions – to be in a place where black people hadn’t been for 20 years.”

Visser had known of Orania for years, having grown up nearby, but he had never visited and knew little about its inner workings. So they decided to visit.

“We landed on a Friday night in a thunderstorm – all the omens were there,” he says, adding that the town presented “a friendly face”



on arrival. “We stayed for four days, though, and if you scratch under the surface of the *Pleasantville* veneer, you start to see what’s going on.

“It played into a kind of creepiness. Parts of the show are more confrontational and there was hostility, but there’s a whole other side that is much more insidious – that was a really interesting flavour that we came away with.”

Crime focus

While *Paradys* has been inspired by the town of Orania, it is first and foremost a crime drama, exploring the types of characters who would be attracted to live in such a place. “Many of the people who live there are racist and there’s such a strange psychology because they’re so unusual, plus there’s a religious spin too. It’s just an odd and creepy universe to visit.”

“It’s this weird place and when you’re in the surrounding towns, you speak of it in a hushed voice,” adds Bristow-Bovey. “You don’t know what’s going on inside.”

There were, however, elements of the visit that will be familiar

to potential viewers the world over, he adds. “The people who live there articulate themselves through the language not of racism but through the importance of belonging and protecting their cultural heritage,” Bristow-Bovey continues.

“We realised this is increasingly the language that gets used across the whole political spectrum around the world, in right and left circles,” he says, which “seems to be getting a disturbingly prominent place in politics.”

It is against this background that the show’s central storyline – that of two black detectives attempting to solve a murder – plays out.

“One of the main two characters is Ezekiel, an angry, probably justifiably embittered and potentially violent person who has been damaged by the apartheid years. And he himself believes in a kind of separateness, a kind of exclusionary nationalism, so with that character and the town we can show a dialogue between two sides.

“These two nationalisms come face to face, but we hope to mediate that with the second police officer, who, while angry, is a more conciliatory character and occupies a go-between role.”

Status & ambitions

The show is in development as an eight-parter with South Africa’s Quizzical Pictures, while Keshet International (KI) came onboard as global distribution and production partner in February.

Bristow-Bovey has written the script, principally in English but with some Afrikaans, because the people of *Paradys* only speak that language, while “story beats” were developed via Zooms with Visser during the pandemic.

“Anton planted the seed and then we met in the dining room of my home in Cape Town and beat out the pilot – there were some wrangles over how, in particular, it should end.”

Bristow-Bovey and Visser then “thrashed” through the remaining episodes, with an array of storylines and structures now in place. “We have it almost entirely complete and in our heads,” Bristow-Bovey says.

The show was the winner of last month’s Series Mania 2022 Co-Pro Pitch competition, receiving a prize of €50,000 (\$55,000), and Quizzical Pictures’s Nimrod Geva says the ambition now is to secure further development funding to finesse the scripts.

“We are looking for partners and talking to talent to attach to the project,” he says, adding that John Trengove (*Manodrome*) is onboard to direct. The hope is that the show will be shot “in a picturesque semi-desert area of South Africa,” and Geva says he is open to all types of partners.

“We are looking for someone who is bold, who is brave and not afraid to tell a story as it is,” he says. “That may be a public broadcaster or a streamer that is looking to make a big splash to say, ‘we’ve arrived’ – someone looking for edgier content. [South African drama] has definitely come up in recent years, so it’s a good time to get something like this off the ground.”

“I love that we are smashing together supposedly two polar opposites who are always at each others’ throats,” says Visser. “By putting them in one arena, we hope to be able to explore more about this country.” **TBI**

Scripted Hot Picks

Our selection of the most exciting, dramatic and thrilling scripted shows heading to market

Django

Producers: Atlantique Productions & Cattleya

Distributor: StudioCanal

Broadcasters: Sky, Canal+

Logline: Reimagining of the classic Western about a man searching for his missing daughter, following the murder of his family years earlier

This reimagining of the classic 1960s Western stars Matthias Schoenaerts as the eponymous Django, along with award-winning actress Noomi Rapace.

Set in the Wild West in the 1860s and 1870s, Django is a man haunted by the murder of his family eight years earlier, and is still looking for his daughter Sarah, believing that she may have survived.

“*Django* has a captivating storyline with a contemporary and psychological twist as well as a unique feminist angle – all of which create a major shift in the narrative and challenges the standards of the genre,” reveals Beatriz Campos, SVP of global sales and production financing at StudioCanal.

Explaining how the 10 x 60-minute series updates Django’s story from previous adaptations, she adds: “We are able to dig much deeper into the complexity of Django’s character than earlier feature films, including his never-before-seen backstory.”

Shocked to finally find Sarah alive and well in the city of New Babylon, Django does not however get the reunion he expected or hoped for.

Sarah, now a grown woman and about to be married, wants Django to leave, as she fears he will put New Babylon in jeopardy if he stays.

However, Django, believing that the city is in danger, is adamant that he will not lose his daughter twice.

“This is the next major partnership between Canal+ and Sky Europe – one of their most ambitious productions to date,” says Campos, sharing the show’s global potential.

“Even though it is set in the Wild West in the 1860s and ‘70s and is designed to show an accurate representation of the period, *Django* is definitely a story of our time.

“Celebrating multiculturalism, minorities and the value of family – it is a story of how disparate people can unite to survive against all odds.”



Top Pick





True Colours

Producer: Bunya Productions
Distributor: APC Studios
Broadcasters: SBS Australia
Logline: An Aboriginal detective returns to her childhood community to investigate a suspicious car accident

Australian drama following the story of Aboriginal detective Toni Alma (Rarriwuy Hick), who is assigned to investigate a suspicious car accident in Perdar Theendar – the community she left as a child and has had little to do with since.

As the investigation unfolds, Alma must “navigate the fine line between respect for her community and its traditions, and maintaining professional standards as a detective, which constantly puts her in an impossible position,” reveals

Laurent Boissel, joint-CEO and founder of APC Studios.

And as the case begins to point towards her own family, Alma must reckon with a killer who is too close to home.

Boissel adds that the 4 x 60-minute crime drama offers fans of the genre something they haven’t seen before, but will nonetheless be very relatable.

“Shot in a high-end cinematic style and set in the Australian Outback, it focuses on a crime being investigated by a female First Nations detective, and exposes audiences to the rich complexity of an Aboriginal community never explored from this perspective.

“Growing up part of two cultures, Toni is a woman who grapples with finding balance in her sense of identity and where she fits in the world. That sense of not quite fitting and that search of belonging is something audiences globally can relate to.”

Rogue Heroes

Producers: Kudos & Nebulastar
Distributor: Banijay Rights
Broadcaster: BBC One, BBC iPlayer, EPIX
Logline: Dramatised account of how the British army’s elite special forces unit, the SAS, was formed under extraordinary circumstances in the darkest days of the Second World War

Based on Ben Macintyre’s book *SAS: Rogue Warriors*, this 6 x 60-minute drama recounts the true-life story of David Stirling, an eccentric young officer, whose actions lead to the creation of the British Army’s SAS (Special Air Service) during the Second World War.

Hospitalised after a training exercise gone wrong and convinced that traditional commando units don’t work, Stirling creates a radical plan that flies in the face of all accepted rules of warfare at the

time. He fights for permission to recruit the toughest, boldest, and brightest soldiers to create a small undercover unit that will create mayhem behind enemy lines; more rebels than soldiers.

“David Stirling is simply such a compelling character – a brilliant but brutal, eccentric, complicated and utterly driven man. While the show doesn’t dwell on his backstory, it does allow a glimpse into his vulnerability coupled with an insane bravery,” reveals Matt Creasey, EVP of sales,

acquisitions and co-productions at Banijay Rights.

Developed for TV and written by *Peaky Blinders* creator Steven Knight and directed by Tom Shankland (*The Serpent*), the cast is lead by Connor Swindells, Jack O’Connell and Alfie Allen.

“There is a swagger in *Rogue Heroes* which hasn’t been seen

in a World War Two series,” enthuses Creasey.

“Steven Knight and Tom Shankland are brilliant at making period dramas feel incredibly contemporary and have brought to life an untold story that has only previously been seen in documentaries and history books.”



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The Porter

Producers: Sienna Films & Inferno Pictures

Distributor: Abacus Media Rights

Broadcasters: CBC

Logline: Explosive drama based on real events about the civil rights movement on the railroads in 1920s America

Inspired by real events, this 8 x 60-minute drama series takes place in the Black community of St. Antoine, Montreal, in 1921.

First World War brothers-in-arms Junior Massey and Zeke Garrett are held in high regard in their community as train porters – an often-demeaning job with long hours, low pay and gruelling conditions, but the best that was available to a Black man at the time.

When a fellow porter is killed on the job due to railway negligence, Junior and Zeke find themselves unlikely leaders on

opposing paths to a better life.

“Through the story of the porters’ struggle to organise a union, the series examines issues of how capitalism fuels race and class divides,” reveals Jennifer Kawaja, executive producer on the series for Sienna Films. “Other issues the series handles include the debate of individualism vs collectivism, feminism and sexual orientation within the Black communities at the time. While all of these issues reflect what the characters would face at the time, they remain extremely relevant to

contemporary audiences.”

Kawaja tells TBI that the series, which is set in the “golden age of rail travel,” combines fact and fiction to explore these real issues and has “no shortage” of global appeal.

“Far from a dry look at a historical period and events, the series uses real history as a basis

to explore engaging, multi-dimensional characters with universally appealing stories in an accessible way,” she says.

“The series celebrates their struggle rather than wallows in their defeats. *The Porter’s* themes of family, belonging, and ambition will also resonate with an international audience.”



Stories To Stay Awake

Producers: Printel Producciones, Isla Audiovisual, ViacomCBS International Studios

Distributor: ZDF Studios

Broadcasters: Amazon Prime Video (Spain) & RTVE

Logline: Four Spanish directors revive the horror anthology with a series of standalone spine-chilling tales

Spanish directors Rodrigo Cortés, Rodrigo Sorogoyen, Paula Ortiz and Paco Plaza have revived Chicho Ibáñez Serrador’s classic 1960s horror anthology series for a new generation.

This 4 x 50-minute series will deliver four standalone tales that give homage to the past of the horror genre while adding a “modern cinematic edge.”

“Fifty years after its premiere, *Stories To Stay Awake (Historias Para No Dormir)* returns to the screen with a fresh take on a cult classic of the suspense genre. The directors faithfully re-envision the most memorable stories from Serrador’s anthology for today’s audiences, and in the

process create a tribute to the historical importance of the series, and its influence on their careers,” reveals Susanne Frank, VP of drama at ZDF Studios.

All episodes tackle different subjects with different issues, but sharing the common thread of horror and suspense.

“Whether it is a mysterious autonomous puppet or an opening hole in the asphalt, you are hooked on the narrative and storytelling until the end,” says Frank, adding that the series takes the best of the original stories and adapts them to the “topics and narrative of today, but keeping the spirit of psychological dread.”

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